


YAHOO!
Internet Life

PRESENTS
THE SURF GURU'S
GREATEST
HITS



 real questions from real surfers—
everything you **really** wanted to know about the internet

A Tale of Two Surfers



**John surfs the
Net alone...**

(To be continued)

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THE SURF GURU'S GREATEST HITS

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WHAT THE HECK? IS THIS??

TWO YEARS AGO, YAHOO!

Internet Life Online (www.yil.com) started a column called Ask the Surf Guru, where we welcomed questions from everyday surfers with everyday problems, and fed them through a slot (don't ask) to our resident Surf Guru, who answered one question every weekday on the site. Since then, Ask the Surf Guru has become one of the most popular areas of the site, with hordes of people asking the Guru for advice on everything from encryption software to singing karaoke on the Net. Herewith

we offer a treasury of the Guru's most useful questions, all put together in one place for your convenience. If you're still craving more, be sure to visit the Guru on the Web at www.surf-guru.com—and while

you're there, ask him a question, *any* question.



Who is this Guru guy, anyway?

That's a very good question, and the only one for which the Guru won't give us a straight answer. The Guru is a shadowy figure. Many claim to have been visited by him at night or even to have seen his face outlined on mountains on Mars, but none can recall what he actually looks like in person. Some say he lives in a pup tent near Area 51; others swear he's Howard Hughes's long-lost nephew. A few whisper he's a computer construction who exists only on the Net. One source claims he knew Guru when he wrestled professionally under the name Gorilla Monsoon. Aging hipsters argue he founded the Beat movement, popularized Nehru jackets, and invented Tang and the Pet Rock. It's all very confusing, and we're not really sure ourselves. We find his manuscripts every morning slipped under the door, written with what would appear to be an old manual typewriter on parchment paper, covered with coffee stains and what look like cheese-danish crumbs. All we really know is that wherever there are confused and frightened Net surfers in need of help, he's there.

A Tale of Two Surfers (continued)



**...Tom surfs with
Yahoo! Internet Life**

Surf the Net in style



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- Complete back issues of *Y-Life*
- Our Cybercelebs section, including interviews with Robin Williams, Pam Anderson, Billy Crystal, Conan O'Brien, and more
- Our E-Z User section, where we translate all that technical mumbo-jumbo into English
- Six daily features, including: Pretty Strange Site of the Day, Incredibly Useful Site of the Day, Ask the Surf Guru, Your Yastrologer, Daily Double Download, and Yahoo! Internet Live



So BASIC...IT HURTS

down-
loading,
e-mail,
and other
fundamentals
for first-timers



So BASIC...IT HURTS



Q. What's the difference between the Web and the Internet?

A. It may help with this question if you think of those Russian nesting *babushka* dolls. The World Wide Web sits inside the Internet along with several other networks. What makes the Web special is that it's a very flexible network of hyperlinked documents.

All the computers on the Net speak a common tongue, or *protocol*, referred to as Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP). TCP/IP is what makes it possible for your desktop PC to converse effortlessly with a supercomputer on the other side of the world.

The subsection of the Net we call the Web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee in 1991, and has two huge advantages over the rest of the Net. It lets you use browser software (Netscape Navigator or

Microsoft Internet Explorer) to display media-rich content on the Net—such as sounds, pictures, and video—without a big hassle.

The second, and more important, difference is the Web's use of hypertext, which allows each part of the Web to be connected to any other part.

Hypertext is text that links to somewhere else on the Web, usually taking the form of underlined words or phrases (typically highlighted in blue or red) that you can click on. Sure, these *hyperlinks* may not seem that exciting, but they revolutionized the business of navigating the Net. (Just imagine trying to get around without them.)

So if the Web is just one store in the megamall we call the Net, where are all the others? They're still out there, but their functionality has largely been replaced or made obsolete by the Web. These include such older tools as Gopher (a primitive ancestor of hyperlinked documents), FTP (a method of transferring files), telnet (a way of logging on to remote computers on the Net), and WAIS (which lets you search for files on the Net using keywords or phrases). All of these old tools still exist on the Net, but most of their functionality has been duplicated on the Web, which has diminished their popularity. You can use Gopher and FTP through your browser. Browser-based chat has largely replaced Internet Relay Chat (IRC)

and Usenet (home of some 50,000 discussion groups, still accessible through newsreader software and now available through such Web-based services as **Deja News** [www.dejanews.com]).

Q. How do I know what my e-mail address is?

A. Your e-mail address consists of two halves—a username (sometimes also called a screen name) and a domain name, joined by the @ sign: username@domainname. If you're on America Online (whose domain name is aol.com), for example, and your screen name is Bruno, that means your e-mail address would be Bruno@aol.com. If you were on Ameritech's Internet service (whose domain name is ameritech.com) and your username there was Bruno also, your e-mail address would be Bruno@ameritech.com.

Usually the domain name of your Internet service provider (ISP) is relatively simple to figure out. Occasionally, though, ISPs make it complicated for no particular reason (case in point: AT&T's

domain name for e-mail is worldnet.att.net). If you're having trouble finding the domain name of your ISP, call its technical-support line and ask.

Q. I'm trying to figure out about downloading. Once you download a text file, should you download to a floppy disk, use Notepad, or what?

A. The big secret about downloading is that you do it all the time. Every time you view anything from the Net on your computer, you've downloaded that information. Your browser is really just a convenient interface for downloading files and presenting them in a pretty package—sort of like the way your TV set presents the shows the networks send out.

Downloading specific files (as opposed to Web pages) from the Net is just like copying them from a floppy disk to your hard disk. You'll need enough space on your hard disk to save the file, and the right software to view whatever kind of file it is. You can download the file to your hard disk or a floppy disk, depending on your need.

Most of the time, if a file has been specifically

made available for download, when you click the appropriate link, your browser will prompt you to decide where to save the file. (Don't forget where you put it!) Once you choose where to save it and click "OK," the download process will begin automatically. The file format could be anything from a .TXT file (the file type for basic text documents) to a .ZIP file (a compressed-file type for which you'll need an "unzipping" program).

If you're just looking to grab the text from a Web page, the easiest way to get it is to highlight the text with your mouse and use the "Copy" command in the "Edit" menu. Then go to your favorite word processor, create a new document, and use the "Paste" command (also under the "Edit" menu) to insert the text onto the blank page. Now just save the file, and you've got yourself your very own version.

If you want to save a graphic, just click the right mouse button on the graphic (click and hold if you're using a Mac) and choose "Save Image As..." from the pop-up menu that should appear. Your computer will prompt you to choose where you want to save it on your hard disk. Choose, hit "OK," and you're good to go.

▶ Here's a list of some of the most common file types you'll run into:

- .GIF, .JPEG, .BMP, .TIF — graphics files
- .DOC, .TXT, .RTF — text/word processing files
- .MOV, .AVI — video files
- .WAV, .AU, .AIFF — sound files
- .EXE — executable file/program file
- .HTML, .HTM — HTML file/Web page
- .ZIP, .SIT, .HGX — compressed file

Q. I've heard the term *clear your cache* in this column and in other places. What is that, how do I do it, and why would I want to?

A. Just as a Central American despot might keep a cache of weapons to help him out in a coup, your browser keeps a cache of files to help speed up your surfing. Your browser's

cache is a folder on your hard disk where it stores temporary copies of the files you pick up as you surf. When you go back to a page you've recently visited, your browser can almost instantly reload the page instead of having to go out and retrieve it all over again. It's kind of like keeping a photocopy of a document in your desk rather than having to go to the library to keep checking out the original.

But there's a downside to your cache as well: If you surf a lot, it can fill up and slow your computer (not to mention your surfing) considerably.

Probably more than half the stuff in your cache will never be used again by your browser. Since your browser has no idea what you're going to visit again, it holds on to everything, just in case. To keep your computer and hard disk happy, it's a good idea to dump the whole thing from time to time.

Here's how:

▶ If you are using **Netscape Navigator 3.0**, click the "Options" menu and select "Network Preferences." Now click the "Cache" tab. To nuke the entire cache at once, just click on the Clear Disk Cache Now button. If you want to delete the files one at a time, the "Disk Cache Directory" box shows you the folder where you can find your cached files, although it's frequently very

difficult to tell exactly what's what in there.

▶ If you are using **Netscape Navigator 4.0**, go to the “Edit” menu and select “Preferences.” Then, in the left side of the window that pops up, click the plus sign (+) next to “Advanced.” Then click “Cache.” Click the Clear Disk Cache button, and then click “OK.”

▶ If you are using **Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0**, click the “View” menu and select “Options.” Now click the “Advanced” tab and check out the “Temporary Internet Files” section of the screen. To view the files in your cache, click “View Files.” To delete all the files in your cache, click the Settings button, then select “Empty Folder” from the screen that pops up.

▶ If you're using **Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0**, click the “View” menu and select “Internet Options.” From that screen you can click “Delete Files” in the “Temporary Internet Files” portion of the screen, and then click “OK.”

Q. I have picked up the Internet stuff pretty well, but I don't understand what *bandwidth* is. Can you help?

A. It may help to think of your Internet connection as a garden hose—in which case size most assuredly *does* matter. If you have a skinny little hose, you can get only a relatively small amount of water per second. But if your hose is wider, you can get more water more quickly. *Bandwidth*, then, is a measure of how much data can flow through your online connection at a given rate. It's measured in bits per second (bps) or kilobits per second (Kbps). Bottom line: The higher the bandwidth, the faster you can download.

If you have a 28.8Kbps modem, you can bring a maximum of only 28,800 bits into your computer per second. If you have a 56Kbps modem, you can (in theory, anyway) bring 56,000 bits into your computer per second, meaning it's a much fatter hose—which makes *you* a much happier surfer.

But just because your modem *can* go at a certain speed doesn't mean it will. The rated speed of your modem is the absolute fastest it can go. And you'll find that you very rarely connect at that top

speed (in fact, all 56Kbps modems are, for certain technical reasons, limited to about 53Kbps). When you dial in to your ISP, usually it will show you how fast you're actually communicating: "Connected at 18,200 bps," for example. Then there's the bandwidth of the site you're trying to connect to. If they've got a skinny hose on their end, you could have the fattest pipe in the world, and it won't do you a bit of good.

To put all of these numbers into perspective, a regular page of nothing but English text is about 16 kilobytes, whereas a minute of full-motion, full-screen video can take up several megabytes. There are a few technologies—such as integrated services digital network (ISDN), asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL), and cable modems—that promise to increase bandwidth for the average user by moving data at speeds approaching 1.5 million to 10 million bits a second. Those speeds would make animation, video, and virtual reality more practical, but the full promise of these technologies still lurks tantalizingly over the horizon.

Q. What's the difference among *bits*, *bytes*, *kilobytes*, *megabytes*, and *gigabytes*?

A. Think of bits, bytes, etc., as the inches, feet, and miles of the digital world.

Bit stands for binary digit, and it's the smallest unit of information in computers. Bits aren't very useful by themselves, since they store only a single piece of binary information, representing a yes/no or on/off state. When bits are grouped together, they become far more useful. Eight bits make up one byte (a computer-age rule of thumb, like "12 inches equal 1 foot"). Anything measured in bits is abbreviated with a small *b*. Anything measured in bytes is represented with a capital *B*.

One *byte* is the amount of information computers need to represent a single character, such as a letter (*A*), number (*7*), or typographic symbol (*@*). In other words, it takes at least eight bits (one byte) of information for a computer to be able to represent even the most minimal piece of data that humans can understand.

A *kilobyte* (KB) is about a thousand bytes (it's actually 1,024 bytes, but feel free to round off—everyone else does). A *megabyte* (1 MB) is slightly

more than 1 million (1,048,576) bytes, while a *gigabyte* (1 GB, pronounced “gig-a-bite”) is about 1 billion (1,073,741,824) bytes. Typically, you’ll see your PC’s processor cache measured in kilobytes (“256 KB cache”), its random access memory measured in megabytes (“32 MB of RAM”), and the amount of hard-disk space in gigabytes (“3.2 GB hard disk”). Modem speed is one of the few measurements that involves bits instead of bytes, as in 28,800bps (bits per second) or 28.8Kbps (kilobits per second).

To recap:

8 bits = 1 byte

1,000 bytes = 1 kilobyte (KB) (We’re rounding off here.)

1,000,000 bytes = 1,000 KB = 1 megabyte (MB)

**1,000,000,000 bytes = 1,000,000 KB =
1,000 MB = 1 gigabyte (GB)**

GETTING ON THE WEB



of ISPs
and DNS and 404s and,
of course, disabling call-waiting



Q. I'm trying to research which Internet service providers have the best connectivity rates. Is there some way to find out if I'm more likely to be able to connect to Service A than Service B, and which service might be better on the whole?

A. A recent study by the California-based firm **Inverse Network Technology** (www.inversenet.com) examined connectivity rates of the big 23 regional and national ISPs. The winners? AT&T, Erol's, IBM, and MCI, for example, had A ratings when it came to call-completion rates. (That means they didn't tie up their users with endless busy signals or dropped connections.)

But connectivity is just part of the story, and Inverse tested only a handful of all ISPs. So where

can you find more information on which ones might be right for you?

Try the **Boardwatch Guide to Internet Service Providers**, at www.boardwatch.com/isp. Its ISP Locator lets you click on the part of the United States you're in, then the area code, to retrieve a list of ISP possibilities. Once you select a particular ISP, you can inspect the information Boardwatch has or contact the ISP directly to get specifics.

If you don't find what you're looking for there, consult the granddaddy of ISP resources, **The List** (thelist.com). True to its name, The List has a big ol' list of ISPs (more than 4,000 of them) that you can search by many criteria, including geographic region, area code, and country code.

But before you get the answers, know the questions you should ask.

Though E.M. Forster said the solution to life was to "only connect," there's more to an ISP than just how often you can get on. Make sure you get solid information on rates (Are you charged a flat fee or by the hour?), tech support (Is it seven days per week, 24 hours per day? Is it free?), the connection speeds the ISP can handle (28.8Kbps? 56Kbps? ISDN?), and software (Does the ISP support only a particular browser? Does it offer separate e-mail programs, graphics viewers, or file-compression software? What

about newsgroup readers and chat software?)

Be sure to approach your selection of ISP as if you were buying a new pair of shoes: If it doesn't fit *you*, it's no good.

Q. Logging on to my ISP is becoming quite vexing. Frequently I can't log on at all, and then, when I do, I often get disconnected. What could be wrong?

A. The first thing you want to do is double-check the settings your ISP should have given you for your modem and communications software.

If those are correct, my first guess would be the phone line that you use to connect. A phenomenon called *line noise* (extra static or crackles, which can confuse your computer) might be to blame. If you have similar problems logging on to other ISPs or online services, this may be the problem. Sometimes reducing your modem's speed can help when line conditions are staticky. You'll go slower, but at least you'll go.

If you have an external modem, the fault could lie in a shoddy cord or a loose connection. The prob-

lem also could be conflicting communications software. Because the root problem could be any of these—and because, no doubt, you have already tried to eliminate as many possibilities as you can—my next piece of advice is to contact your ISP's tech-support line. Many ISPs also feature online help forums. (But these won't do you much good, of course, if you can't get online in the first place.)

If the problems persist, and your ISP can't help you, your best course is to change to a different ISP. Sometimes communication problems with one simply don't happen with another. If you need to find another ISP, check out the thousands available by visiting the **Boardwatch Guide to Internet Service Providers** (www.boardwatch.com/isp) or **The List** (thelist.com), both of which are described in the previous question's answer.

Q. I keep getting logged off the Net when someone calls me. How can I turn off call-waiting? I tried 70*, #70, and 1170, but none of them worked. HELP!!

A. We all make mistakes. Hey, even Michelangelo painted Adam with a navel.

Your difficulties in disabling call-waiting are much easier to correct than an inappropriate belly button.

The procedure for disabling call-waiting varies from area to area. As you seem to know already, *most* systems allow you to disable call-waiting by putting one of the following prefixes in front of the number you're dialing, like so (I'm pretending you're dialing 555-1111):

***70, 555-1111**

70#, 555-1111

1170, 555-1111

It looks as if you reversed the * and #—a completely understandable mistake.

Depending on your dial-up settings, you may need to change your ISP's software. Usually, when you get the dialog box to connect to the Net, the phone number will be displayed in a field you can modify at will. If this is the case, just add in the appropriate prefix in front of the number you want to dial, and you're all set.

This can get a bit tedious, however, if you want to disable call-waiting every time you log on. If you always want call-waiting disabled, you should change your modem setup in your "Control Panel." To do this, click the Start button, select "Settings,"

then click “Control Panel.” When the “Control Panel” window pops up, double-click the “Modems” icon and select the “General” tab. Now click on “Dialing Properties” and you should get a screen, the bottom half of which is titled “How I dial from this location.” You should see a check-box—labeled “This location has call-waiting. To disable it, dial:”—followed by a pull-down menu. Click inside the check-box, then select one of the three choices the pull-down offers: *70, 70#, or 1170. Click “OK” to save your settings, and you’re done.

If that doesn’t do the trick, call your telephone company to make sure you have the correct command for its phone system.

Q. How can I make my Web surfing go faster?

A. Making surfing go faster is like making water run uphill: It can happen, but only under truly miraculous circumstances. The obvious way to increase your speed is to get the fastest modem your ISP will support. There are also a few simple techniques to make sure you’re getting the most out of whatever equipment you’ve got.

➤ Increase the size of your disk cache. Your cache keeps copies of Web pages on your hard disk. The more space you allot for cache, the less often your browser needs to huff and puff over to a Web site to download graphics.

➤ Purge your cache regularly. Putting graphics into your cache speeds you up only so much. When the cache fills up, it can actually slow down your browser. Empty it once every 5 to 10 surfing sessions. (See page 11 for instructions.)

➤ See if your software needs updating. ISPs regularly produce updates to their dial-up software. It's like a tetanus shot: If you can't remember the last time you got one, you need to get one now.

➤ If you're using AOL, try using an Internet-only ISP. AOL's service is slow in some areas, and this can affect your Web browsing. A local ISP that does nothing but deliver an Internet connection may be faster and less congested. Try it for a month (you can usually find free trial offers) to see if it makes a difference.

➤ Browse off-line. Though both Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0 and Netscape

Communicator can store Web pages on your hard disk—graphics included—for later viewing off-line, off-line browsers are specially designed to do the trick, and you can easily find a passel of them by searching for *offline browser* in **ZDNet's Shareware Library** (www.hotfiles.com).

6 Check the traffic. Generally, the worst time to go online is from 5 p.m. to midnight Eastern time; try to avoid logging on during those hours. If you can't, at least find out where the jams are. **The Internet Traffic Report** (www.internettrafficreport.com) "measures the performance of major Internet routers around the world once every hour" and then rates traffic in U.S. and metropolitan areas (as well as European and Asian areas) on a 0-to-100 scale. You can also check similar reports at **MCI** (traffic.mci.com) and the **Internet Weather Report** (www.internetweather.com).

Q. What are all these error messages I keep getting? 404? 403? DNS? Help! Is it me, my computer, or the Net?

A.

The good news is that it's probably not you.

The bad news is that it could be just about anything else.

You'll see a couple of variations of this "404" business with "404 Not Found" or "404 Access Denied." "404 Not Found" occurs when the Web page you're trying to get to doesn't exist anymore (whether temporarily or permanently). Check to make sure you've got the right address and that you've typed it in correctly, going over the exact spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and spacing, just as your seventh-grade English teacher would. Also, remember that the Internet is essentially held together with duct tape and baling wire, and sometimes it just decides it doesn't feel like working. Click your browser's Reload button a couple of times, just in case the site is "having a moment." If you still get "404 Not Found," it's possible that the site doesn't exist anymore—or at least not at its old location. Try running a search for the site's name through **Yahoo!** (www.yahoo.com) and see what comes up. The site may have changed locations.

"403 Forbidden" means you've tried to enter a government-restricted site. Within hours, you and your family will have disappeared without a trace.

Just kidding. "403 Forbidden" is what you get when you try to access a file that hasn't been set with "read permissions." All that scary jargon really means is that you can't view the site

because the person who maintains the page has either set it up incorrectly or doesn't want you to read it. Your only recourse is the old standby: Check the spelling of the address, hit Reload a few times, and check the search engines.

DNS error messages usually show up dressed as "Server does not have a DNS entry." DNS stands for *domain name system* (or *server*), which is what your browser uses to look up the numerical Net addresses for the names you enter. This error could mean temporary network slowness or other Net problems. You should also bear in mind that your browser can sometimes mistake its own local problems for problems at the site you're trying to reach. Though you will get a DNS error if a site does not exist, you'll also get one if your connection to your server is faulty. Check with a site you know definitely has a DNS entry (such as, say, ours—www.yil.com). If you still get a DNS error, there's probably something wrong with either your connection to your ISP or your ISP's connection to the Net. Try hanging up and reconnecting. If that doesn't work, it's time to get out the chicken bones and flour and try a little voodoo.

SEARCHING THE NET



**dos
and don'ts, stop words, and
the eternal quest for info nirvana**



SEARCHING THE NET

Q. How can I obtain the URLs of the best search engines and Web directories? How can I tell which ones might be better than others?

A. The Guru won't pretend he isn't biased when it comes to this subject (there's a reason the word *Yahoo!* appears in our name), but he'll try to rise above it.

First, ask yourself what type of search you want to perform. True search engines send out *bots* (automated software programs) to scour the Net automatically for everything they can lay their hands on. *Web directories* rely on human beings to select, review, and choose the sites they eventually list.

Though search engines may have an impressive number of sites in their indexes, they often throw hundreds of irrelevant sites at you (because bots aren't as smart as humans, and they have simply

dreadful taste). On the other hand, directories usually return very focused, high-quality results, but they do not haul in the huge numbers—the huge numbers you might need to find the needle hidden in the virtual haystack.

So, how can you find out who's the best? Guru used a Web directory (OK, I used **Yahoo!**) to search for *search engines*. Old faithful responded with more than 500 related areas.

Guru reached nirvana with the first link he clicked. A reference librarian at **Introduction to Search Engines** (www.kcpl.lib.mo.us/search/srchengines.htm) puts seven major search engines through their paces for “scope, interface, logic, and results.” **Search Engine Watch** (searchenginewatch.com) offers easy but in-depth comparisons of the search engines, along with tutorials on how to squeeze them for the best results.

If you'd rather just get down to searching without having to figure out which one is best first, try them all—or close to it. **Cosmix Mother Lode** (www.cosmix.com/motherload), **Dogpile** (www.dogpile.com), **MetaCrawler** (www.metacrawler.com), and **SavvySearch** (guaraldi.cs.colostate.edu:2000/form) let you hunt through multiple search engines and directories at once while you kick back and sip a latte.

Q. A friend told me to watch out for stop words when searching on the Net. What are *stop words*?

A. *Stop words* are little words that search engines ignore to make their searches more effective—usually such words as *and*, *the*, and *or*. They are excluded either because they are extremely common or because they are used by the search engine for performing more specialized searches. When you think about how many documents on the Web contain the word *the*, stop words begin to make sense.

If you really do want to search for one of these terms, there's an easy way to get around stop words. If you put words in quotation marks, search engines will look for every word inside the quotes, in the exact sequence you specify. If you wanted to look for sites about the 1980s TV crime drama *Cagney and Lacey*, for example, you would want to search for

"Cagney and Lacey"

not

Cagney and Lacey

Searching with quotation marks prevents you from ending up with documents about the star of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *White Heat* (James Cagney)—not to mention Lacey-Walsh Carpet and Tile Co., Lacey's Spring (a town in Alabama), and Lacey Seelinger, "a white Devonshire Rex cat living in West Virginia."

Q. I like using search engines such as AltaVista, but the number of hits I get back is waaaaaay too many for me to handle. Are there special search engines that handle just my interests?

A. Search for information on the Web long enough, and eventually you realize that usually the biggest difficulty is not having too little information: it's having too much. Specialized search engines help with this problem by letting you narrow the field before you even enter your search terms.

Search **Yahoo!** for *specialized search engine* and you'll find gems such as **Search.com** (www.search.com), with links to more than 500 focused search engines or directories, and

HomeArts Search (www.homearts.com), which boasts a searchable database of articles from 10 major publications, including *Cosmopolitan* and *Popular Mechanics*. There are also links to **Car Talk** (cartalk.com), where you can tinker with automotive archives and databases, and **Thrive's Health Library** (www.thriveonline.com/health/lookitup.html), where you can find the doctor who's right for you or track down info on everything from asthma to zinc deficiency. Speaking of good medicine, such sites as **Achoo** (www.achoo.com) and **MedGuide** (www.medguide.net) will keep you in the pink. You'll keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen **AgriSurf** (www.agrisurf.com), which has links to resources on agribusiness, organic farming, live-stock, and machinery.

And don't overlook the **Virtual Dictionary of Search Engines** (www.dreamscape.com/frankvad/search.dictionaries.html), which has offerings on business, games, law, and more.

Finally, if you're feeling frivolous, **Search Engines—Beaucoup** (www.beaucoup.com) serves up a list of links to databases devoted to hunting down info about juggling, jazz, and even James T. Kirk ("seeks out content where no search engine has gone before").

Q. You've talked about how to search on the Net and what to avoid, but I want a simple—yes, *simple*—checklist I can put on a Post-It and stick on my monitor, because I have a lot of trouble making my searches work.

A. Your wish is my command (Post-It not included).

If your searches are typically unsuccessful, try the following hints.

- 1** Start with broad, general terms.
- 2** If broad terms yield too many responses, try ones that are more specific.
- 3** If your keywords produce no results, use synonyms.
- 4** Make sure the search engine isn't case-sensitive—that is, make sure it doesn't care if you search using uppercase or lowercase letters (in general, you'll get better results if you use all-lowercase letters in your search terms).

5 Use *wild cards* to broaden your search. If you wanted to search on *hosts*, for example, but didn't want to exclude *hostesses*, you would want to use *host** as your search term. That would pull in information on *hosts*, *hostesses*, *hostels*, and Web site *hosting*.

6 Finally, check the About or Help information at the search engine you're using for site-specific details and hints on how to improve your searches using the engine's individual search scheme.

Q. A few months ago, I ran across a site that could find any white-pages phone number in the United States. Unfortunately, I lost the address when my computer crashed. Can you and Yahoo! help?

A. Indeed. **Yahoo!** can help you find people quicker than Sam Spade—or the 411 operators—ever could. Its **People Search** (yahoo.four11.com) area lets you search for the phone numbers, postal addresses, e-mail addresses, and home pages of people around the United States.

If you come up empty-handed there and are looking for some serious searching power, you can't do better than **The Ultimate White Pages** (www.theultimates.com/white). Not only is this site cheaper than regular directory assistance (it's free), but it's also faster than most similar services because there are no flashy graphics to load.

Drawing on several resources—including **Yahoo!**'s People Search, Infospace, Lookup USA and others—The Ultimate White Pages consolidates all the phone-number search engines on one page so you can immediately try another engine if you don't find your number the first time. As an added bonus, once you type your search information into one of the forms on the page, a clever little applet automatically copies it into all the other blanks, giving you one-click searching convenience. (You have to be using at least Netscape Navigator 2.0 or Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0 for this to work.)

If Ultimate's busy, just stop by **AnyWho** (208.224.112.20) or **WorldPages** (www.worldpages.com). And if *that* doesn't help, let your fingers do the walking through **Yahoo!**'s **Phone Numbers** section (www.yahoo.com/Reference/Phone_Numbers).

Q.

What are *symbolic operators*?

A.

Symbolic operators are little tools that computers use to help you search on the Web.

An example: Let's say you're looking for a serial killer named, oh, I don't know, Guru. You might search for

serial killers AND Guru

The *AND* in the above search string is what's called a Boolean operator. *Boolean operators*, a group of terms typically used in searches, include *AND*, *OR*, and *NOT*. To use a symbolic operator instead, you would write it like this:

serial killers + Guru

Other symbolic operators include quotation marks and the minus sign (-). You'd use the minus sign instead of the word *NOT*, like so:

serial killers - Guru

The above would be the same as writing *serial*

killers NOT Guru. This would tell the search engine to look for the words *serial killers* but disregard documents containing the word *Guru*.

Quotation marks around a search term tell the engine to search for exactly that phrase in exactly that order. Another example:

“serial killers named Guru”

This would return only that exact phrase, ignoring all others. That means *serial killers called Guru*, *spree killers named Guru*, and even *serial killers that are named Guru* would be rejected.

But not all search engines use the same symbolic operators. (That would make things *far* too easy.) To find out the idiosyncrasies of your favorite engine, click on its Help area for more details.

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PROTECTING YOURSELF ONLINE



Q. How can I tell when I'm connected to a secure server?

A. Both Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer provide graphical cues when you are in secure mode. In Netscape 3.0, you'll see a blue line across the top of the page and an unbroken key on a blue background in the bottom-left corner. (You should have a broken key on a gray background there most of the time.) Explorer alerts you by displaying a yellow padlock in the bottom-right corner—locked for secure, unlocked for insecure.

Netscape actually took a cue from Microsoft (now *there's* a first) on this, and did the same thing with its 4.0 browsers. You'll find the same little padlock down in the bottom-left corner—locked for secure, unlocked for insecure.

Another way to tell that your connection is

secure is by looking at the *uniform resource locator* (URL)—the part that starts with `http://`. If it reads `https://` in place of `http://` (notice the extra *s*), that means you are dealing with a Web site using *secure sockets layer* (SSL). SSL is the technical wizardry that ensures your online information is sent in encrypted form, untampered with, and unavailable to prying eyes.

Q. What are *cookies*? Are they a threat to my system or my privacy? Should I block or refuse to accept them?

A. *Cookies* are morsels of information that are sent from Web sites to your browser, then stored on your hard disk. The information they hold, however, isn't of as much interest to Big Brother as it is to Big Business. Cookies typically hold such nuggets as log-in or registration data, or just a code so that the site can keep track of which pages you looked at or what purchases you made there.

Whenever you return to a site that uses cookies, the site's server looks for any it may have left on your hard drive. If it finds a cookie, it knows you've been there before and has some information it can

use to serve you better (just the way the guy at the deli counter who knows you always order turkey with lettuce, tomato, and extra mustard).

Are cookies a threat to your privacy? That depends on your level of paranoia. In most cases, cookies are a convenience. After you register once with the online edition of ***The New York Times*** (www.nytimes.com), for example, you won't have to retype all your identifying info—including your password—the next time you go to that site. The cookie will tell the *Times* who you are and let you in. But this also means that anyone else using your computer can log in using your account.

Also, you should know that Web browsers keep the cookies from one site hidden from all other sites. That means ***The Wall Street Journal Online*** (www.wsj.com) will never know you cheat on it by reading the *Times*.

If you're the paranoid type and don't want any hidden files on your computer, there are ways to block or refuse cookies. Remember, though, some sites rely on them to enhance your experience or perform various functions (shopping carts are a good example). Blocking cookies can make your visit there slower and clumsier. Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator can be set to alert you when a Web site wants to toss its cookies (to coin a phrase) into your system. Both programs

have a “Warn before accepting cookies” check-box. In Netscape Navigator 3.0, it’s in “Options/Network Preferences/Protocols.” In Navigator 4.0, it’s in “Edit/Preferences/Advanced.” In Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0, it’s under “View/Options/Advanced.” In Internet Explorer 4.0, open “View/Internet Options/Advanced,” then scroll down to the “Security” section.

If you’re looking for something stronger, there are several “anti-cookie” programs. **NSClean** (www.wizvax.net/kevinmca) offers products that will erase cookies and hide your identity with both Navigator and Internet Explorer, and, on the whole, handle cookies in a manner Mrs. Fields would probably never approve of. Guard Dog Deluxe from **CyberMedia** (www.cybermedia.com) also gobbles cookies for you.

If you’re the type who likes to take matters into your own hands, you can always toss your cookies yourself. (We’re just going to beat that joke into submission.) On a PC, you’ll find all those little files in your “C:\Windows\Cookies” folder. If you’re on a Mac, cookies are contained within a single file called MagicCookie or cookie.txt.

If you’re leery of monkeying with your browser, but even more leery of paying green money for a program to handle cookies, a nice compromise is to download some try-before-you-buy shareware

from **ZDNet's Shareware Library** (www.hotfiles.com). Just search for *cookies* and you'll locate programs as friendly as a Fig Newton that will help you protect yourself.

If you'd like to teach yourself more about how these cookies crumble (and what you can do about them), **Cookie Central** (www.cookiecentral.com) and the **Electronic Privacy Information Center's Cookies Page** (www.epic.org/privacy/internet/cookies) can be more helpful than an army of Keebler Elves.



Should I surf anonymously? Can I?

A. Since privacy is in the mind of the beholder, it's possible to surf with greater or lesser degrees of anonymity. Though Guru feels that most privacy intrusions are more annoying than threatening, the Web does provide choices for those who feel more concerned and perhaps less trusting than he does.

The Anonymizer (www.anonymizer.com) is a one-of-a-kind tool that shields your identity anywhere you surf on the Net. But there are several other programs and services that will help you

keep your online privacy as secure as a bar of gold in Fort Knox.

Crypto Kong (www.jim.com/jamesd/Kong), for example, is a free Windows NT program that lets you encrypt your online communications. It's less complex than other similar products, because it doesn't make you futz with creating and publishing something called a *public key certificate*—a confusing and unwieldy part of the process when using many encryption programs.

Luckman's Anonymous Cookie for Internet Privacy (www.luckman.com/products/anonymouscookie) is a completely free utility that allows you to nuke all the cookies that are stacked like Oreos in your browser's cookie directory. (See the previous question's answer for more details.)

Lucent's Personalized Web Assistant (lpa.com:8000) helps you configure your Microsoft Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator browser so you can make up fake IDs whenever you're at a site that requires registration and personal information before you can enter. The Assistant *remembers* your fake IDs, too, so you don't even have to bother having a good memory for your fibs when you go back to those sites. As an added bonus, there's no software to download. All you need to do is configure your browser to use Lucent's site as a proxy. (Further instructions are available on the site.)

And that's just a Whitman's Sampler of what's available out there. For more information on keeping your identity online hidden away like some Phantom of the Opera.com, browse through the **Electronic Privacy Information Center's Online Guide to Practical Privacy Tools** (www.epic.org/privacy/tools.html). There you'll find digital cloaking devices such as anonymous remailers, cookie crumblers, and software for keeping your e-mail and even your Internet phone conversations as private as a confession to a priest.

A search for *privacy* on **Yahoo!** returns hundreds of useful sites, from the **Internet Privacy Coalition** (www.privacy.org/ipc), which follows legislative and technological developments in cryptography and privacy, to the **Privacy Rights Clearinghouse** (www.privacyrights.org), which features the Identity-Theft Survival Kit (the sort of adult problem you can safely bet Ward Cleaver never had to warn the Beav about). **Yahoo!** also has links to FAQs and newsgroups on the subject. If you think this is overkill, just remember what Miss Manners once said: "What you have when everyone...is...bullied out of any desire for privacy is not democracy; it is kindergarten."



Am I going to get scammed on the Net?




As Cuthbert J. Twillie observed in the classic W.C. Fields film *My Little Chickadee*, "If a thing is worth having, it's worth cheating for." And since your money is worth having, yes, you might get scammed on the Net. But there *are* ways to protect yourself.

The Net is probably no more or less dangerous than the off-line world. Scams and cons abound in the physical realm, so it's only natural that they'd migrate to the Net. A Harris poll concluded that scammers have at one time or another contacted 90 percent of us off-line, and nearly one-third of us responded.

But how can you tell if someone's trying to take you for a ride online? Take this easy quiz.

- 1 Have you received any e-mail from a source you didn't recognize?
- 2 Was the e-mail's return address anonymous?
- 3 Did the e-mail involve a solicitation of any kind?

- 
- 4 Did it use the Honest-John approach, saying something like "This is not a scam"?
 - 5 Did it use uncheckable references, such as "Before he died, Liberace himself endorsed this product"?
 - 6 Did the message use URGENT-SEEMING CAPITAL LETTERS?
 - 7 Was the body of the message addressed to someone else, as if you had accidentally received the e-mail? And did it seem as if the sender was revealing "inside" information on a product or service?

If you answered yes to the first question and any of the other six, watch out. Someone's trying to pick your pocket.

So what can you do about it?

- 1 Don't respond to e-mails that arouse your suspicion. Report them to the system administrators for your online service or ISP.
- 2 Make double-dog sure that any company you deal with online really exists. Call its local and

800-numbers to be absolutely, positively sure.

3 Put companies through an ethical Breathalyzer by checking them out at the **Better Business Bureau's** home page (www.bbb.org/index.html). After you're done there, visit the database of complaints about online companies at the **Netcheck Commerce Bureau** (www.netcheck.com), a site established to promote consumer confidence in making purchases on the Internet.

4 Inoculate yourself against the latest frauds by heading to the **National Fraud Information Center** (www.fraud.org) and by signing up for **Internet Scambusters** (www.scambusters.com), an e-mail 'zine that tracks Internet Scams. One of the most Web-savvy sites fighting the good fight of consumer protection is **Public Eye Undercover Shoppers** (www.thepubliceye.com).

5 Use an ISP that offers protection against credit card fraud (AOL, AT&T, and PSINet are examples). AOL, for instance, covers the \$50 deductible if an unauthorized user charges a purchase to a customer's card while using its service. AT&T and PSINet don't charge for fraudulent credit card purchases made over the

Web from merchants that use their services.

Through all this, though, keep in mind something that elder statesman G. Gordon Liddy once said about the real world. It holds true for the online one, too: "Obviously crime pays, or there'd be no crime." Fortunately, there are ways to reduce its wages.

Q. What are the chances a Web site is snooping on me in some way?

A. The chances that you're being snooped on are directly in proportion to the size and technological level of the site you're visiting. I'm guessing that **Stark's Museum of Vacuum Cleaners** (www.reed.edu/~karl/vacuum) isn't snooping on you. It may be a different story when you visit Microsoft, though.

The **Federal Trade Commission** (www.ftc.gov) recently made a report to Congress in which the authors stated they had found that 87 percent to 97 percent of commercial Web sites gathered some kind of personal information about their visitors, and that most of the time users were not informed as to how the information was to be used. In response to its findings, the FTC is urging the abandonment of self-regu-

lation among Web sites and advocating that new, tough privacy laws be passed.

What's more, the **Electronic Privacy Information Center** (www.epic.org) found that 23 of the Net's 100 most popular sites use cookies—the usage-tracking files that Web sites may in some cases deposit on your PC without your prior knowledge or acceptance (see our cookie question on page 43). Cookies in and of themselves aren't bad, but not a single one of the 23 sites told the user about this intrusion, and only 8 sites gave users some measure of control over whether the site provider could share a user's personal information with anyone else.

If these studies are any guide, you can probably assume that a big commercial site is likely to be collecting some kind of information on you. You can also assume that it will be reluctant to disclose that fact, and even less enthusiastic about giving you any way to restrict its use of the information it gets about you. By employing some of the techniques and software we've described earlier in this section, you can deflect a good many of these intrusions into your life. And when a site wheedles you for personal info, you can always use the trick that lawyers and politicians figured out a long time ago: Lie.

Q. Do I have to buy screening software for my kids? Is there anything like a public search engine just for kids?

A. The decision to limit your children's access to the Internet is a highly subjective and personal one that I can't make for you.

Before you make a decision about *blocking software*—aka censorware—you owe it to yourself (and your kids) to spend some time surfing the Net and talking with your children to sort out whether blocking software is necessary. After all, we all know the hardest thing for kids to resist is something you tell them they can't have.

One of the strongest arguments against these packages is that they use relatively primitive means to select the sites they block. Because of this, they tend to err on the side of blocking too much, rather than too little, which means they often exclude more than you bargained for. With this software installed, you might find your computer unable to access information on AIDS and safe sex, the National Organization for Women, or the Electronic Frontier Foundation's censorship files.

There are many fascinating and sordid tales to

be told about blocking software—far too many to detail here. But if you're hungry for more information, there's no dearth on the Net. **Peacefire** (www.peacefire.org) maintains an archive of articles on the various blocking programs, such as **Cyber Patrol** (www.cyberpatrol.com), **CyberSitter** (www.solidoak.com/cysitter.htm), **Net Nanny** (www.netnanny.com), and **SurfWatch** (www.surfwatch.com).

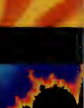
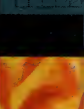
As far as childproofed (but still interesting) areas go, they do exist online. The evidence for this is at **Yahooligans** (www.yahooligans.com). This child-safe search engine from **Yahoo!** offers a variety of links to an array of resources in a simple-as-ABC format that avoids anything smacking of suggestive content. A search for *erotic* brings no results; neither do searches for *sexy* or *horny*.

Kids Web (www.npac.syr.edu/textbook/kidswweb), another kidcentric service, offers links to resources for art, computers, science, and social studies. The site also links to games and sports such as *Mortal Kombat* and the **Yahoo!** Sports page (testimony to the fact that the guys and gals behind the scenes are not workaholic Victorians).



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GURU GRAB BAG

Q. I'm thinking of putting a business of some sort online. But before I do, I want to know where to find information on the demographics of the Web.

A. The Internet Statistics and Demographics area on **Yahoo!** has more resources on this topic than Saddam Hussein has anthrax. You'll find not only data on hosts and domain names but also research on **women who shop on the Net** (205.232.76.174/survey2.html), **Net traffic reports** (www.internettrafficreport.com), and the **Internet Index** (www.openmarket.com/intindex), where you can pick up such conversation starters as "Number of free months of WebTV service advertised on Snapple bottles: 1."

The Net and everything about it—the age of surfers, their income, how many PCs they have in

their households, how often they lie—is more scrutinized than the Kennedy assassination and the Shroud of Turin combined. And there's no shortage of companies trying to play the game. **Cowles/Simba Information Services** (www.simbanet.com), **Cyber Dialogue** (www.cyberdialogue.com), **Forrester Research** (www.forrester.com), **International Data Corporation** (www.idc.com), **Jupiter Communications** (www.jup.com), and the publisher **O'Reilly & Associates** (www.ora.com) are all trying to stake out a claim to some credibility. Although you can mine these sites for press releases and come up with the occasional gem—or at least a chunk of zircon—most of the companies sell their data for prices individuals and small businesses can't afford.

But you don't have to settle for ignorance. There are plenty of demographic guardian angels out there ready to help you out. The highly respected **Georgia Institute of Technology's Graphics, Visualization & Usability Center** (www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/gvutop.html), which conducts a yearly WWW User Survey, posts the results of current and past surveys at its site.

Cyber Atlas (www.cyberatlas.com) calls itself "The Reference Desk for Web Marketing," and it more than lives up to its name. Besides the front-page articles on the Top 25 sites and Web site

salaries, you'll find hard market numbers in such categories as U.S. Web demographics (19 percent of surfers are age 50 or older; 27 percent have a high-school education or less), geographics (1.6 percent of Chinese families own a computer; 1 in 1,000 Africans use the Web), usage patterns (**Yahoo!/Four11** had 32 million unique visitors in March 1998; the *Kelly Blue Book* had the biggest jump from the previous month, from 400 to 909, or 127-percent growth), and more, including advertising, intranets, push technology, and modems.

My favorite, though, is **NUA Internet Surveys Ltd.** (www.nua.net/surveys/index.cgi), an Irish Internet consultants' site that covers every survey, poll, study, digest, assessment, measurement, and what-have-you, whether it's electronic commerce (16 percent of customers who purchased new cars last year used the Net for research before making a purchasing decision, compared with 10 percent in 1996) or how many use the Net for local content (51 percent) or how the Web affects TV viewing (surfers spent 60 percent more time surfing the Net than they did watching television).

Is there more? Does Bill Gates fill out the long form? The site includes such categories as business (covering ads and marketing, banking and trading, careers, the computer industry, e-commerce, entertainment, media, retail, and travel),

social issues (abuse, censorship, education, government and legislation, online communities), technical topics (browsers, e-mail, infrastructure, intranets, ISPs, search tools, security), and demographics (children/youth, general, seniors, usage patterns, women). It also sports a search function that will let you dig deep into its archives. If knowledge is power, you'll leave NUA feeling like the Doge of Data, the Emperor of Internet Info, the Sheik of Surveys. You get the drift.

Q. I take part in a lot of chat groups online, and I don't understand some of the terms they use. What do *AFAIK*, *LOL*, *BBL*, *F2F*, and all the others mean, anyway?

A. Nothing musses my pompadour like engaging in a tête-à-tête with some unmedicated sort on the Web when he, she, or it starts slinging those acronyms like Satchel Paige fastballs. So in the spirit of keeping our online confabs as warm and fuzzy as those in a Taster's Choice commercial, I present this list of acronyms and their translations (this is far from complete, but it should get you started).

AFAIK: as far as I know

ASAP: as soon as possible

BBL: be back later

BRB: be right back

BTW: by the way

C4N/CFN: ciao for now

F2F: face to face

FAQ: frequently asked questions

GRMBL: grumble

IMHO: in my humble opinion

IRL: in real life

LOL: laughing out loud

REHI: hello again (re-Hi!)

RO(T)FL: rolling on the floor laughing

TTFN: ta-ta for now

TTYL(8R): talk to you later

YMMV: your mileage may vary

And the two I'd be lost online without:

IMVORO: in my vociferous, obnoxious, ranting opinion

BYORL: bring your own rocket launcher

Q. I heard on CNN that Yahoo! was offering free e-mail. How do I register for this service?

A. Though the Internet still hasn't managed to deliver a free lunch, it *has* spawned free e-mail. **Yahoo!**'s recent acquisition of RocketMail now allows it to offer Yahoo! Mail, where you can get your own e-mail account free of charge. Your address will sport the prestigious @yahoo.com domain name, and you'll be able to access your e-mail from anywhere in the world as long as you can connect to the Web—from a

library, hotel, or other office—so you don't need to go through your ISP or even your own computer.

If you think Web-based e-mail means sacrificing features, think again. The service allows you to perform such functions as organizing your mail into folders, searching and filtering your mail, attaching files, and using an address book.

You *did* ask specifically about **Yahoo!**'s service, but we should probably mention that there are other free e-mail services out there as well.

The most prominent are **Hotmail** (www.hotmail.com) and **Juno** (www.juno.com). Hotmail works much the same way as Yahoo! Mail, while Juno requires you to run its software on your computer (although Juno has the added bonus of acting as your Internet connection, so you don't need a separate ISP).

Bigfoot (www.bigfoot.com) and **ProntoMail** (www.prantomail.com) also offer free e-mail accounts, though—as with others—they'll charge a fee for such extras as virus checking. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. When we last searched **Yahoo!** for *free e-mail*, we found more than 30 sites that offer it. Maybe we should rename it *free-mail*.

The only catch with these services is that you have to look at a few ads—the same devil's bargain you make with television (and most commercial Web sites).

Q. I'm interested in tracing my ancestors, but I have no idea where to start. Any suggestions?

A. Well, you seem to be doing pretty well so far; you found the Internet, which is possibly the biggest boon to genealogy enthusiasts since William the Conqueror's Domesday Book.

At **Ancestry Home Town** (www.ancestry.com), it's free of charge to search the Social Security Death Index, World War I civilian draft registrations, books on colonial families in the United States, California Cemetery Inscription Sources, genealogy columns, free maps, and more. Also, there are hundreds more resources available if you're willing to pay a monthly subscription fee. Those include court and probate records, deed and land records, and maps of Saxony, Thuringia, in 1873 or of Apache country from 1865 to 1886.

Once you get your genealogical feet wet there, do a quick search at **Yahoo!** and you'll find more than 80 genealogy categories and more than 1,000 sites on the topic. There are 17 beginner's guides, including **Getting Started: Genealogical Basics** (www.everton.com/start.html), the **National Genealogy Society's Suggestions for**

Beginners (www.genealogy.org/~ngs/sugbeg.html), and **20 Ways to Avoid Genealogical Grief** (www.rootsweb.com/roots-l/20ways.html).

If you are swamped by researching a common last name, you can call upon the help of others in a similar fix at **Genealogy's Most Wanted** (www.citynet.net/mostwanted).

For those with bluer blood than most, and vague memories of coronations and revolutions, **Yahoo!** also lists several resources for **Royal Genealogies**, including the descendants of Charlemagne (www8.informatik.uni-erlangen.de/html) and the royal families of Tonga, Fiji, Burma, Hawaii, Cambodia, and Swaziland (www.uq.net.au/~zzhsoszy/index.html). It's a nifty means of seeing if your history actually matches up with all that stuff Grandpa told you.

Q.

What is *ego surfing*?

A.

Ego surfing is when you use search engines to see how many places on the Web your name appears. Generally, you just go to a search engine, put your name in quotation marks, and find out where and when it shows up. A quick

AltaVista search for *Surf Guru* resulted in a gratifying list of 33,155 mentions for yours truly, while jokesmith Jay Leno came in with just 18,871 (put that in your chin and smoke it, Mister I-have-a-TV-show-and-you-don't). HotBot is our personal favorite for ego surfing (not that we do a lot of ego surfing or anything...really), because it lets you specify that you're looking for "the person" in its drop-down menu.

But search engines aren't the only self-esteem StairMasters around. Newspapers and magazines might list you when the engines don't—try the **Electric Library** (www.elibrary.com), a subscription service that handles hundreds of newspapers, magazines, and news wires; TV, radio, and government transcripts; and more.

An adjunct to these for yet more ego surfing is **Deja News** (www.dejanews.com). This catalog of nearly 50,000 Internet newsgroups and their postings has stockpiled more than 100 million posts, and your name could be in there if you've participated in newsgroups since March 1995 or so, or if some friend or foe decided to mention you. Just pray it's not in *alt.conspiracy* or *alt.cows.moo.moo.moo*.

Q. Can I catch a virus by looking at a Web page?

A. Remember when the Martians pulled up in our driveways on Halloween night in 1938? Or when they popped Walt Disney in a Frigidaire after his death?

You don't? That's funny; neither do I. That's probably because those things never happened. They're urban legends—modern folktales that illustrate our collective anxieties and phobias. Kind of like the belief that you can catch a virus from a Web page.

Once and for all: Viewing images, filling out forms on Web sites, and reading e-mail is almost always harmless (we'll get to the "almost" part in a moment). Viruses are programs and must be run ("executed," in computer parlance) in order to work. E-mail messages (and Web pages, for that matter) are mostly just text. They have no executable code that could infect your computer. The bottom line: If it looks like a normal e-mail, it can't be a virus.

But we did say "almost" always harmless. E-mail can contain attached files, and these files can contain viruses. Be *very* careful of files that end in .EXE (or any other extension you don't rec-

ognize) when you don't completely trust the person who sent it to you. And it's not just .EXE files you have to worry about. You can be infected with a so-called macro virus by opening up a word processing or graphics file in another program.

And Web pages aren't *entirely* innocent, either. Reported security problems in both Java and ActiveX technologies can leave your system open to possible attack. Though there have been no cases reported of this kind of virus, we aren't yet 100-percent sure that an attack couldn't happen. If you're worried about this, you can turn off your browser's automatic handling of Java and ActiveX (although we should stress that there have been *no* reported cases of this kind of infection).

► For **Netscape Navigator 3.0**, navigate through "Options/Network Preferences," then click the "Languages" tab. From there you can disable Java. Navigator doesn't use ActiveX, so you don't have to worry about it.

► For **Netscape Navigator 4.0**, click "Edit/Preferences," then "Advanced" in the left window. You can disable Java from there.

► For **Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0**, click "View/Options," then click the "Security" tab.

From there you can disable Java and ActiveX.

► For **Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0**, click “View/Internet Options,” then click the “Security” tab. From there you can either click the High Security radio button, or click the Custom button, then the Settings button, which will let you disable anything that’s the least bit suspicious.

Fortunately, the Net’s got plenty of resources for the modern virus hunter. **EliaShim** (www.eliashim.com), for example, not only offers downloads of demo versions of anti-virus programs for DOS, Windows 3.x, Windows 95, and Windows NT, but it will also let you download a free copy of ViruSafe WEB, a program you install in your Web browser. ViruSafe WEB then automatically scans files you download from the Web before you save them to your hard disk.

And though there may be some viruses floating around the Net, bear in mind that there are also a boatload of virus hoaxes as well. The best vaccine for a virus myth is information, with a side order of humor, which you’ll find at **Computer Virus Myths** (www.kumite.com/myths/home.htm). This site debunks the media hype and hoopla that surround viruses (and nourish virus myths as if they were suckling babes).

Q. What is a *.sig* file? People keep telling me I need to put one into my e-mail.

A. The term *.sig* stands for *signature*, and it refers to a predefined, personalized block of ASCII text that is attached to the end of all your online correspondence. A *.sig* allows you to identify yourself the same way every time, without wearing out your fingers typing your clever sign-off over and over again.

Depending on your needs, your *.sig* may contain your own name, your title and company's name, your contact information, the URL of your Web site, or a pithy quote. As a rule of thumb, you should keep your *.sig* file to four lines or fewer. Long *.sigs* are annoying, especially to newsgroup denizens, because they can take a long time to download. If your *.sig* is longer than your post itself, you're bound to draw some flames.

Following are instructions for creating a *.sig* using Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer. Remember: If you create a *.sig* in one of these programs, it will show up only when you're using that program. To set up your *.sig* in a dedicated e-mail program, consult the manual or call

the manufacturer's tech-support line.

► To create a .sig in **Netscape Navigator 3.0**:

- First, open up your word processor (Notepad, SimpleText, or Microsoft Word will work fine) and create a new document. Then type in your .sig exactly as you want it to appear and save it as a text-only file. Make sure to name it something obvious (such as "mysig.txt"), and remember where you save the file.

- From within Navigator, select "Mail and News Preferences" from the "Options" menu.

- Now click the "Identity" tab. At the bottom of this box you'll see a line called "Signature File," with a button labeled Browse to the right of it. Click the Browse button, locate your .sig file on your hard disk, and double-click it.

- Click "OK," and you're done.

► With **Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0**, creating a .sig is a little easier, and it lets you create separate signatures for News and Mail:

- Under the "Go" menu, select "Read Mail" or "Read News," depending on which signature

you want to create.

- Select “Options” from the “News” menu in News, or from the “Mail” menu in Mail.
- Click the “Signature” tab.
- Click the Text radio button, and type the signature you want in the box.
- The box titled “Don’t add signature to Replies and Forwards” might be checked. You probably want to click this to make the check disappear. This way, all mail you send will have your signature.
- If you want to use a separate text file (as in the Navigator explanation above), you can do that by clicking the File radio button, then clicking “Browse” to find your signature file.
- Click “OK,” and you’re done.

Stumped for .sig ideas? Guru waves good-bye with one suggestion: “The prospect of being cooked alive is not an attractive one!”—a universal truth reflected in the movie poster blurb for *First Man into Space*. For other such unforgettable sign-offs, spend a day at **The Astounding B Monster** (www.bmonster.com).



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